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ABSTRACT

Utah is experiencing chronic, critical, special-educator shortages in all positions and disability areas, including speech and language pathologists and school psychologists. The Utah Attrition Study found that the most common reason for special education professionals leaving positions was "moving out of state," followed by personal reasons. The largest area of potentially preventable attrition was "transferring to a general education teaching position." A study examining why Utah special education teachers leave to become general education teachers surveyed 51 Utah teachers who had left special education. Results indicated that although the teachers were satisfied with the instructional aspects of their work, they were dissatisfied with the noninstructional aspects of special education teaching, particularly paperwork. Another study examined why special education teachers stay on the job, surveying 812 Utah special education teachers with 10 or more years of teaching experience. More than 91.5 percent of these teachers were satisfied with the instructional aspects of teaching, but only 44.4 percent were satisfied with the noninstructional aspects. While overall, teachers felt supported, more support with paperwork would be helpful. Potential strategies to prevent special education teachers from transferring include increasing support from principals and administrators, using technology and organizational skills to help manage paperwork loads, ongoing inservice training and continued education regarding best practices for managing stress, and mentoring or professional peer coaching to pass on skills learned in the classroom. (TD)

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A QUALIFIED TEACHER FOR EVERY STUDENT: KEEPING THE GOOD ONES

National Special Educator Shortages

Chronic shortages of special educators--including teachers, speech pathologists, and school psychologists--have persisted in all regions of the U.S. since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142 in 1975 (Billingsley, 1993; Boe, Cook, Bobbitt & Terhanian, 1998; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Lauritzen, & Friedman). Special education teacher shortages in the U. S. are currently the largest in history (Pipho, 1998). Special educators are more likely to leave the classroom than any other teacher group (Ingersoll, 2001). Shortages of special education teachers are twice as large as in general education. Approximately 12,241 special education teaching positions were left vacant or were filled by a substitute because suitable candidates could not be found. About 32% of new special education teachers are not fully licensed. Over 10% of all special education teachers are not fully licensed. Shortages of special education teachers in rural states are especially acute (Koury, Ludlow, & Weinke, 1991). These shortages are significant because the loss of one special education teacher could put an entire rural district in jeopardy (Thurston & Sebastian, 1996). Recruiting special education teachers to move to rural communities is almost impossible, and many who are there plan to leave in the future (Westling, & Whitten, 1996).

Utah Special Educator Shortages

Utah is experiencing chronic critical special educator shortages in all position and disability areas. Each year Utah school district superintendents are surveyed to determine the personnel needs of school districts throughout the state. Special education positions have continually led the list of critical shortages. In response to this long history of chronic shortages, the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) created a critical personnel shortages committee to study the problem. The committee includes district special education directors, university special education faculty, and USOE staff. The committee has been meeting on a regular basis since 1998.

In a 1998 study, researchers found that over 10% of special education teachers working in Utah schools left the classroom. The percentage has increased yearly reaching 13.7% in 2000-2001 (Menlove, Lancaster, & Garnes, 2003). The percentage appears to be increasing (see Table 1). This increase in special educators leaving Utah school districts is also seen in increasing attrition of speech and language pathologists and school psychologists (see Table 2). Many of these vacated special education teaching positions were filled with non-licensed "teachers." In some cases these "teachers" were long-term substitutes without college degrees or special education training.

Table 1. Utah special education professionals who left special education positions

Year	Special Education Teachers	Speech & Language Pathologists	School Psychologists
1998	10.7%	11.0%	8.2%
1999	6.7%*	6.6%*	10.2%*
1999-2000	16.2%*	13.3%*	11.1%*
2000-2001	13.7%	13.0%	15.9%
2001-2002	13.2%	15.1%	15.9%

*These numbers reflect a change in the data collection time period

Reasons Why Utah Special Educators Leave

The Utah Attrition Study was conducted to determine the amount of attrition occurring in the state of Utah among special education personnel, and to find out the specific reasons why special education personnel are leaving. The reasons for leaving are displayed in Table 2.

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Table 2. Reasons why Utah special educators leave their position

	#1 Reason		#2 Reason		#3 Reason		#4 Reason		#5 Reason	
Year	Reason	Percent	Reason	Percent	Reason	Percent	Reason	Percent	Reason	Percent
1998	Moved	24.5%	Changed District	13.2%	Transferred to Reg. Ed.	11.0%	Retired	10.7%	Other	9.7%
1999	Moved	26.2%	Left Education	16.0%	Other	15.5%	Changed Districts	13.1%	Retired	12.6%
1999-2000	Moved	22.5%	Other	19.9%	Transferred to Reg. Ed.	14.7%	Changed Districts	13.1%	Left Education	11.2%
2000-2001	Moved	23.2%	Other	13.6%	Transferred to Reg. Ed.	12.3%	Changed Districts	12.1%	Retired	11.6%
2001-2002	Moved	20.2%	Other	15.9%	Transferred to Reg. Ed.	14.7%	Changed Districts	12.1%	Retired	11.4%

The most common reason for special education professionals leaving positions is "moving out of state". The second most common reason is "other" which includes getting married, having children, illness, etc. The largest area of potentially preventable attrition is transferring to a general education teaching position.

Potential Solutions

Potential solutions designed to stem the tide of increasing special educator attrition in Utah must be explored. Efforts of universities to train increasing numbers of special educators will not meet this need if these educators do not stay in their positions. Interventions that prove effective in providing support to teachers, speech and language pathologists, and school psychologists must be explored. In targeting intervention efforts, it is important consider whether attrition can or cannot be prevented. One of the largest target groups of possible preventable attrition is that of special education teachers who transfer to general education teaching.

A Closer Look at Special Education Teachers who Transfer to General Education

A small number of Utah special education teachers leave their positions each year in special education classrooms to become general education teachers. This is a small but significant group of well-trained, experienced special educators who for a variety of reasons determine that special education teaching is not for them. By looking at the reasons why special education teachers are leaving their classroom positions to teach in general education classrooms, school and district level administrators can develop strategies to provide teachers with the inservice training and support necessary for good teachers to continue to teach. Universities can better prepare teachers who have the skills needed to remain in the classroom (Adams, 2001; Billingsley, 1993; Brownell & Smith, 1992).

Why Utah Special Education Teachers Transfer

To better understand why Utah special education teachers leave to become general education teachers, an in depth survey of the teachers who transferred in the 1999-2000 school year was conducted. USU graduate researcher Elizabeth Adams (2001) surveyed 51 Utah special education teachers to find out why they left their special education positions and what might have been done to influence them to stay. Survey results indicated that these teachers were somewhat to very dissatisfied with the non-instructional aspects associated with special education teaching. Non-instructional aspects included paperwork, student discipline, support from others, caseload or class size, student placements, meetings, and legal issues. Frustration with the paperwork requirements of special education was a major issue. See Table 3.

Table 3. Satisfaction with special education instructional and noninstructional aspects

Aspect	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Instructional	43%	39%	16%	2%
Noninstructional	6%	18%	29%	47%

(Adams, 2001)

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These teachers reported that they did not feel the same way about non-instructional duties associated with their general education teaching positions. They were satisfied to very satisfied with these duties. The teachers were satisfied to very satisfied with the instructional duties in both special and general education teaching. See Table 4.

Table 4. Satisfaction with general education instructional and noninstructional aspects

Aspect	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Instructional	63%	31%	4%	2%
Noninstructional	47%	39%	14%	--

(Adams, 2001)

In fact, almost one-third of the teachers listed love of teaching as the factor that influenced them to transfer to general education rather than pursuing another career. They indicated that they wanted to teach. They enjoyed teaching and were satisfied with the teaching aspects of education. These results closely parallel what Billingsley and Cross (1991) found in their study of special educators who transferred to general education.

What Might Have Influenced Them to Stay

Teachers were asked to indicate what factors might have influenced them to remain in the special education classroom. The top factors listed in order of selection were (Adams, 2001):

1. assistance with paperwork;
2. additional teachers or paraeducators;
3. better salary;
4. smaller caseload;
5. other teaching choices or opportunities;
6. appreciation and respect;
7. district support; and
8. better or more materials and resources.

Potential Strategies to Prevent Special Educators from Transferring

Only 12% of the teachers surveyed indicated that nothing would have influenced them to stay in the special education classroom. That means that 88% of the special education teachers could have been influenced to stay. The following are a small number of the multiple strategies that might be used to do just that—keep teachers in the special education classroom.

1. While special education professionals report that they like the teaching aspects of their jobs, they are burdened by the administrative functions of the job, in particular paperwork (Adams, 2001).
2. There are indications that support by principals and administrators can relieve much of this frustration (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001).
3. Using technology and organizational skills may help manage the paperwork loads associated with the provision of special education services (CEC, 2001).
4. Ongoing inservice training and continued education regarding best practices can also better prepare teachers to manage the stress of the special education classroom.
5. Using mentoring or professional peer coaching activities may assist teachers to use skills learned through ongoing training in the classroom, thus minimizing frustration (Askvig, B. A. & Garnes, L., 2000).
6. Strategies need to be fully explored in order to better meet the needs of special education professionals.

Conclusions

This group of Utah special education teachers who transferred to general education teaching positions said that if the time and physical demands of the non-teaching aspects were reduced or eliminated, perhaps special education teacher attrition might be reduced. This information may allow university faculty and school or district administrators to better understand the issues of retaining qualified special education teachers. This understanding could lead to the development of strategies, which would minimize attrition and promote retention of special

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education teachers. If qualified special education teachers are not available in the classroom, children will not have access to high quality education. Considering variables and issues that lead to teacher attrition and reviewing factors that lead to teacher retention will impact the availability of appropriately qualified special education teachers.

Utah Special Education Teachers Who Stay on the Job

Each year from 10 to 14 percent of all of the special education teachers in Utah leave their teaching positions. For the past four years the number of special educators leaving has increased or remained stable at about 13%. Nationwide the number of leavers is similar. While focusing on retaining these teachers is critical, it is also important to note that almost 90% remain in the classroom. Although a great deal is known about why special education teachers leave, there is very little information about why they stay. This lack of information led to a survey of Utah special education teachers who have remained in the field for 10 or more years. All Utah special education teachers with 10 or more years of teaching experience were surveyed. Of the 1,091 teachers surveyed, 812 completed and returned the survey for a return rate of about 74%. Participation in the survey was confidential and voluntary and involved filling out a three-page survey (about 10-15 minutes). The survey was divided into seven sections: demographic information, teaching history, teacher satisfaction issues, teacher support issues, reasons why you stay in your special education teaching position, reasons why you might leave your special education teaching positions, and some additional open-ended questions. Demographic information is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Utah special education teacher who stay demographics

Age	30-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-54	55+	
	3.6%	10.4%	15.2%	23.4%	23.5%	23.9%	
Gender	Male 18.5%	Female 81.5%					
Ethnicity	African Amer	Caucasian	Hispanic	Pacific Islander	Other	Multi	
	0.1%	96.8%	0.5%	0.5%	1.5%	0.5%	
Total number of years teaching	10-15	16-20	21-25	25+			
	31.3%	28.7%	21.6%	18.3%			
Total number of years teaching special education	10-15	16-20	21-25	25+			
	38.8%	30.2%	17.9%	13.1%			
Number of years in current position	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	20+		
	17.3%	18.7%	31.7%	17.4%	14.7%		
Took off time from teaching	Yes 37.7%	No 62.3%					
Number of hours per day spent at school	0-3	4-7	8-10	11-13	13+		
	0.7%	16.1%	77.2%	5.2%	0.6%		
Number of hours per week spent working at home	0-3	4-7	8-10	11-13	13+		
	59.8%	30.5%	6.9%	.9%	1.7%		
Number of trainings attended each year	0-1	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	6+	
	2.5%	27.9%	25.3%	16%	6.3%	22.1%	

How satisfied are Utah special education teachers? When asked to rate their satisfaction, more than 91.5% of the teachers were either very satisfied or satisfied with the instructional aspects of teaching. Only 44.4% were very satisfied or satisfied with the noninstructional aspects. This is a strong message that Utah special education teachers stay on the job because they have a strong commitment to instructing student with disabilities. See Table 6.

Table 6. Special education teacher satisfaction ratings

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Instructional (aspects associated with delivery of instruction)	39.4%	52.1%	7.7%	0.9%
Noninstructional (all other aspects of teaching i.e. paperwork, discipline, etc.)	2.4%	22.0%	44.5%	31.1%

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Teachers further elaborated upon their perceptions of special education teaching. The large majority, 97.9%, indicated that their jobs are stressful, but they also perceive their jobs to be important. Fewer teachers agreed that others perceive their jobs to be important. More than 95.5% enjoy being a special education teacher. When asked if they plan to stay to the end of their careers, 85.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they would stay. Many reported that they have found ways to deal with the stress of special education teaching. See Table 7. Support also influences how teachers perceive their positions. Support related question responses are displayed in Table 8. While overall teachers feel supported, they reported that more support with paperwork would be helpful. See Table 8.

Table 7. Special education teacher perceptions of special education teaching

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My university program prepared me well to be a special education teacher.	20.7%	48.0%	24.9%	6.4%
I enjoy being a special education teacher.	51.4%	44.0%	4.1%	0.6%
I perceive my job to be an important job.	75.2%	22.7%	1.6%	0.5%
Others perceive my job to be an important job.	22.6%	41.9%	28.4%	7.1%
I would recommend special education teaching to someone else.	25.4%	38.0%	23.8%	12.9%
I plan on staying in special education until the end of my career.	47.3%	38.2%	10.0%	4.5%
Being a special education teacher is a stressful job.	77.1%	20.8%	1.9%	0.2%
I have found ways to deal with the stress.	25.8%	62.0%	11.1%	1.1%
I think about leaving special education.	16.8%	36.0%	29.5%	17.8%

Table 8. Special education teacher perceptions of support

Collegial support	Available and helpful	Available but NOT helpful	Not available, would have been helpful	Not available, would not have been helpful
Support from other special education teachers	76.5%	9.7%	10.7%	1.4%
Support from related services providers	69.6%	17.6%	8.9%	1.6%
Positive working relationships with general educators	69.6%	16.5%	8.1%	1.8%
Building administrator support	67.2%	20.2%	6.3%	2.1%
District director/supervisor support	60.2%	23.3%	9%	3.8%
Parent support				
Positive working relationships with parents	65%	19.5%	9.1%	0.7%
Paraeducator support				
Adequate hours of paraeducator support	49.3%	7.1%	36.1%	4.1%
Adequately trained paraeducators	47.4%	8.9%	33.9%	4.6%
Paperwork support				
Support/assistance to complete paperwork	21.9%	10.5%	56.8%	8.7%
Physical resources				
Adequate classroom space and location	64.4%	5.2%	26.2%	1.7%
Adequate technology resources	51.2%	12.3%	32%	1.8%
Adequate curriculum materials and books	49%	8.4%	37.3%	2.6%
Professional resources				
Professional development opportunities	73.8%	15.4%	7.6%	1.1%
Information regarding state & federal policies	70.9%	18%	8.3%	0.4%

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Teachers were also asked to rate their reasons for staying in special education teaching. The top five reasons were:

83% Feeling of success and joy when a student learns
74% Population of students with whom teacher works
59% Working one on one with students
52% Financial reasons
49% Smaller class size

The bottom five or least selected reasons for staying were:

28% Support from district office supervisor/director
26% Collaboration with parents
25% Acknowledgment of administrators/parents/others of a job well done
24% Opportunity to discuss student education goals and plans
21% Professional affiliation with field of special education

Teachers were asked to rate the reasons why they would leave special education teaching. The top five reasons were:

75% Special education paperwork
62% Burden of dealing with legal requirements and threats
49% Disruptive/difficult students
46% Became "burned out" from teaching in special education
45% Too many students on caseload

The bottom five or least selected reasons for leaving were:

21% Personal reasons unrelated to work
18% Disagreement with special education policies/practices
17% Involuntary transfer to other schools within the district
10% Few new professional challenges
8% Inadequate training to teach special education

Conclusion

Information provided by experience special educators can be used to address working conditions and job configurations of current Utah special education teaching positions. Taking into consideration feedback provided, school and district leaders may be able to reexamine how special education teaching positions are designed and also provide support to new special education teachers. Additionally, providing opportunities to focus on and reinforce the positions aspects of special education teacher may be helpful in retaining special education teachers.

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